BELIEF AND UNBELIEF
Mark 9:14-31
February 23, 1969
Communion Meditation

It's a difficult time in which to believe. That is one of the new realities of the 1960's. Religion continues to be popular. But in this rapidly changing, revolutionary age when nothing stays the same very long, authentic belief, in the traditional sense is becoming a very difficult task.

Some men greet other men with the question. "What do you know for sure?" and today the honest answer to that is "Not really very much" There are, in fact, very few absolutes. The more we learn about the world, about man, the less we seem to know that is absolutely and irreversibly true.

In the next several weeks, I am going to be talking about what we can believe, but this morning I want to focus on the difficulty inherent in the act of believing itself. And I would begin with the assertion that one of the new realities with which everyone of us has to cope is that it is a very difficult time in which to believe.

Our time is very secular, and although that is not a bad state of affairs, it does have a great deal to do with this matter of believing. Let me explain. The word secular, contrary to some of the things you may have read, does not mean decadent, godless, paganism. The word refers rather, to an evolutionary process by which mankind has slowly come to assume more and more of the responsibility for its own destiny and welfare. The process, we are told, is now culminating in our time. Dietrich Bonhoeffer described it as "Man coming of age"; and Leslie Newbigin describes the new, secular man as follows: "Today he knows how to control the powers of his environment. He does not pray to be delivered from disease or from draught; he gets himself inoculated or he builds irrigation works." (p. 31, Honest Religion for Secular Man)

That rather simple analogy defines quite adequately what we mean when we use the word "secular". Man is in charge; no longer is it possible to blame fate or evil spirits or God for the conditions in which men live; rather the responsibility is ours. In this sense, secularism is a good thing: when men acknowledge their responsibility for their own welfare, good things begin to happen. Dams are built, vaccines are developed, better methods of farming are cultivated and organs are transplanted.

It needs also to be noted that secularism is one of the goals for which Christian missionaries have struggled in other cultures. For instance, in India, the caste system, the untouchables, the practice of Temple prostitution were all based on religious assumptions and convictions. And not until the religious assumptions were either decimated - or at least removed from a position of power could India begin to cope with the very real problems of hunger and disease and poverty - conditions actually perpetuated by religion.

In our culture, some people oppose blood transfusions on religious grounds. Fortunately - in this area we are totally secular - and make our decisions on the basis of human need and the solving of an immediate crisis. That is secularism in its best sense.

Nevertheless it is difficult to believe in a secular age. If man, not God, is calling the shots, what does prayer mean? What about worship and all the other traditional forms of piety? Why bother? These are just a few of the problems raised by secularism - and it adds up to a difficult time in which to believe.

There are other reasons, of course. It's a busy world . harboring a knowledge explosion that makes the Encyclopedia Britannica obsolete before the ink is dry.

And the end result is a feeling of schizophrenia on the part of many Christians. For six kdays a week a man lives in a busy, totally secular world. And then on Sunday, he is confronted with ancient creeds, vague concepts, rituals that have lost their meaning. And if he is able to believe at all - it is a well insulated believing that begins as he comes through the doors of his Church and ends as he goes out through them one hour later.

Probably he is aware of the dilemma he is in. Probably there are moments when he thinks longingly about how simple it must have been to live one hundred years ago. Probably he feels very uneasy about trying to be a believer - and a little guilty because there are times when he just can't believe.

Probably he thinks wistfully about other people he knows who seem to have no problems in this area at all - people of strong faith - true believers.

Part of the problem, I believe, is that somewhere the idea gained currency that Christian faith is synonomous with the believing of certain doctrines. That is - to be a Christian means intellectually accepting certain creedal statements as the truth. In this definition there is no room for doubt - or growth - in fact there is precious little room for thinking. Christian orthodoxy is measured by the amount of doctrine a man can swallow - and the best way to play that game is simply to stop thinking.

I can remember the great trauma of experiencing my first authentic religious doubt. Perhaps you can, too. In my case, it came at the point when a Freshman course in Geology confronted my Sunday School theology of creation. I survived it - but the point is that for years I had poured into me the idea that faith - or belief - is incompatible with doubt. Now, no one put it in those words: no one ever sat me down and said, "You must never, never doubt." Nevertheless, that is precisely what had come through.

There are, of course, a lot of people who still operate within this system. Perhaps you are among them. And if you are - or if you feel guilty or uneasy because you are not - allow me to suggest that faith in God, or Jesus Christ, is nt the same thing at all as intellectual belief in certain doctrines. Allow me to suggest that faith is trust - and that faith actually frees a man to doubt, to live in the tension of his own unbelief. Let me take it a step further and suggest that honest doubt may be a far more accurate indicator of faith - than rote acceptance of doctrine. And finally that perhaps the healthiest thing you and I can do is to confess our own occasional unbelief.

One man put it this way: "When faith is open to the most terrible darkness, it will be receptive to the most redemptive light. What can the Christian fear of darkness, when he knows that Christ has conquered darkness, that God will be all in all." The writer is Thomas J. J. Altizer, and he said that in - of all places - an essay on the Death of God. (Radical Theology and the Death of God, p. 20-21) Does anyone really, honestly believe - 100% - all the time? I think that is a legitimate question to ask.

A man had come to find Jesus. He had brought his young son - a lad who apparently had epilepsy - one of the most dread diseases in the ancient world. He had come because he had heard Jesus could heal. He wanted to believe that - but he found Jesus' disciples, and they tried, and they failed. A crowd gathered, a crowd of cynics who took delight in the humiliation of the disciples. An argument ensued. The father and his young son stayed.

When Jesus came, he discovered the problem - the fact that the boy had not been healed. The father, in a moving confession of his love for his son, and his own inability to help him interrupted - ". . . if you can do anything, have pity on us and help us." Jesus responded - "If you can: all things are possible to him who believes." And the desperate father cried out: "I believe." And then, in one of the most important sentences in the Bible: "Help my unbelief!" And the boy was healed.

I believe that is an extremely relevant confession. " I believe: help my unbelief." Both were going on at the same time. The man wanted desperately to believe that Jesus could heal his son. He did believe. But his reason told him it couldn't happen. Others had tried: he couldn't believe. Both at the same time - belief and unbelief, together expressed in the cry for help.

I think that speaks to men and women who live in a secular age. That meets us - where we are, at the very point of tension between what we want to

believe and what we find we cannot believe.

I can't improve on the way Frederick Buechner puts it in his book, The Magnificent Defeat (p. 35) - so I will use his words: "There is something in me that recoils a little at speaking so childishly and directly. . . I am saying just this: go to him the way the father of the sick boy did and ask him. Pray to him, is what I am saying. In whatever words you have. And if the little voice that is inside all of us. . . says 'But I don't believe, I don't believe' don't worry too much. Just keep on anyway. 'Lord, I believe: help my unbelief', is the best any of us can do really, but thank God it is enough."

There is a lot of that believing-unbelieving father in everyone of us. Let's acknowledge it - let's confess it - let's bring that along with us as we come to the Lord's table.

This is the first Sunday in Lent, and we begin today to follow our Lord as he walked slowly to his death. The importance of that death is that it was for you and for me, for all those who have gone before us and all those who have come after us. It was for us - and nothing about us, our belief or unbelief, alters that fact. We begin our following at his table- at the place where he calls us to be - in fellowship with him. That is the incredibly good news of the Christian faith.

Lord, we believe: help our unbelief. Amen.